

# Building tomorrow's workforce today

Knowledge, ability to innovate, adapt keys to growth in today's world

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Today is the time to plan for tomorrow. In the business world, much of that planning is centred on hiring—and keeping—skilled employees.

Halifax Regional Municipality's newly released Economic Strategy notes that economic success is no longer contingent on the accident of resource endowment or proximity to market. A large population or a deep harbour does not guarantee success. Growth today depends on access to knowledge and the ability to innovate and adapt.

"More specifically, successful growth is about smart communities attracting and retaining smart people. In a world economy centred on talented people, what's important is being a place where the best and the brightest want to live," says Fred Morley, senior vice president and chief economist with the Greater Halifax Partnership and project manager of the HRM Economic Strategy development team.

For Greater Halifax businesses the talent pool has always been deep and plentiful. Indeed, 63 per cent of the population has completed university, college, or trade school. The city's six universities and three campuses of the Nova Scotia Community College—with collectively more than 40,000 students—attract people from across the country, and around the world. More and more are remaining after graduation.

"Post secondary education is critical in forming our people's capacity to innovate in response to future opportunities and needs. Access to the full spectrum of learning opportunities from research to classroom study gives our workforce the skills they require to drive eco-



John Sherlock

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conomic development in Greater Halifax and the province," says Mike Whalen, associate vice-president, Enrollment Management and International for Mount Saint Vincent University.

We will soon need that skilled workforce more than at any other time in our history, notes Stephen Dempsey, president and CEO of the Greater Halifax Partnership. On the plus side, our unemployment rate is one of the lowest in the country. When that fact is coupled with the reality of an aging workforce, however, the outcome could be a critical shortage of skilled workers.

"We live in an aging province.

Within 20 years, 40 per cent of Nova Scotia's population will be 55 or older," says Mr. Dempsey. "To date, in-migration of young people and immigrants has insulated the region from the adverse effects of this. But this will not meet future demand. We need to act now to meet tomorrow's needs."

The HRM Economic Strategy recommends five action thrusts: Improve information collection and dissemination on business labour market needs; develop a labour force attraction and retention initiative; increase immigration to HRM, and increase retention of immigrants; draw on

all the resources of HRM's post-secondary institutions to enhance the economy and the quality of life; and work with the Department of National Defence and other federal government departments and agencies to expand their presence in the community.

These are important areas for growth and development, says Mr. Morley. "They will provide the foundation we need for a strong economy in the 21st century."

Awareness among the business community is also critical, says Don Mills, president and CEO of Corporate Research

Associates. "The labour market is tight, and it is getting tighter. With almost full employment, there is no longer an immediate source of skilled labour to draw on. We need to address our short-term and our long-term needs."

Clearly, young workers will play an important role in addressing both those needs. "We need to keep graduates here and give them experience," notes Mr. Mills. "Incentives to hire new graduates, for example, would be helpful in addressing the need for workers while helping young people get the training they need."

Growth in the new millennium is all about people. Prosperity requires a bustling job market. Communities with a deep labour pool can meet the demands of growing business and attract people looking for a world of opportunity.

"Our task," notes Mr. Dempsey, "is to build a stronger labour force; to offer upscale opportunities; to attract and retain youth, immigrants and ex-patriots; and to meet the challenges of an aging society and global competition."

"We are," he adds, "ready for that challenge and the time to act is now."

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